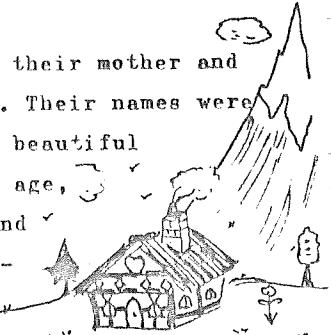




Once upon a time, there were three sisters who lived with their mother and father in a little cottage at the foot of a high mountain. Their names were Cora, Dora and Flora. Cora was the eldest, and she was as beautiful as a butterfly in a summer meadow; Dora was the middle in age, and she was as beautiful as a swan on a calm blue lake; and Flora was the youngest, and she was as beautiful as a perfect red rose, jewelled with the dew of the early morn.



Now, when Cora was fourteen years of age, and just entering the full beauty of maidenhood, she went one day to her mother and said:

"Mother dear, I am fourteen years old and almost ready to be a maiden and mistress of my own house, yet I have never been to the top of the mountain which shelters us from the harsh east wind. Please, mother, wrap some bread and cheese in my apron, and I will climb the mountain and look over the lands to the east."

But her mother was sad, and said, "Daughter dear, I am afraid for you to climb the mountain, for folk say that there is an old hag who lives up there all alone, all crazed with evil and loneliness, and that she kills any who go up the mountain, and sucks the marrow from their bones."

Cora was frightened when she heard this and went away. But the next day she asked her mother the same thing and had the same reply, and the next day, and the next, until her mother sadly and with a heavy heart did as she asked and wrapped a loaf of bread and a round of cheese in Cora's apron. And she bade farewell to her daughter and placed around her neck a golden chain from which hung a little golden rose.

Cora said farewell to her father and her sisters and set off to climb the

steep, winding path which led from the door of the cottage to the summit of the mountain.

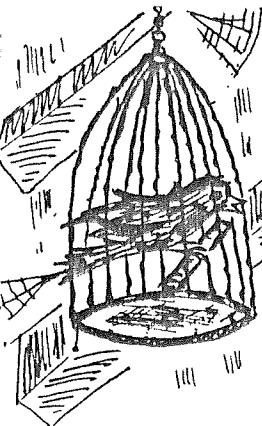
When she had walked for a little time and a long time, and had eaten her loaf of bread, and her round of cheese was no more than a memory, Cora came to a place where the narrow path became wider and more level, and where a little stream dropped from the mountain to run into a dark, rocky pool. Cora stopped to drink from the pool, for she was very thirsty. But as she put out her hand towards the water, she heard a harsh voice behind her saying, "What are you doing by my pool, maid?"

Cora turned round and saw the ugliest, crookedest old hag that she had ever seen. Her hair was grey and hung over her face like rope from a sunken ship; her hands and feet were filthy beyond description; and her nose was exactly the right size and shape for taking the cork out of a wine bottle.

Cora was terrified and stammered that she meant no harm; but was very thirsty and craved some water from the pool. "Well," said the beldame, "if it's water you want, drink your fill, but you can pay me for it by cleaning my house."

Cora thought this a mean way to treat a traveller, but as the last drop of water was some three miles down the path, she drank her fill and, taking more water in the bucket the old woman pointed out to her, she followed her new mistress to a tiny but very dirty hut, which was built squarely across the path which led to the top of the mountain.

Now, the hut may have been small, but it was more than a few years since it had seen water and a scrubbing brush, and Cora saw that she would have her work cut out to clean it in a day and a night. Still, she set to her task with no very good grace, and scrubbed and rubbed and polished until her back ached, and her arms and legs were stiff and as heavy as marble. She was still no more than half done, when she heard a little voice above her head:



"Little Mistress, Little Mistress," it said, "of your kindness please give me a sip of clean water." Cora looked up: there, hanging from the rafter was a cage, and in the cage was a small, bedraggled lark.

"Please, Little Mistress," she pleaded "a mouthful of clean water."

Cora looked about her, but the only water in the hut lay in her bucket, and that was so black that had she had a pen she could have written with it. The only way she could bring clean water to the little bird was by fetching it from the pool, and that would mean that she would not finish her cleaning before night fell again, so she said to the bird, not unkindly, "You must wait, Little Sister, until I have finished my work, and then I will bring you all the water you need."

The bird sighed deeply but said nothing more, and when Cora next looked up, it seemed to her that the bird and her cage were smaller than they had been before. At last the work was finished, and the hut was so clean that it sparkled in the sunlight. Cora put away her scrubbing brush and polishing rag and poured the dirty water away outside the door. Then she remembered the thirsty lark, and looked up into the rafters, but neither of the bird nor of the cage was there any sign.

Cora went out to where the old woman lay sleeping under a tree, and, not daring to waken her, or to try to find a way around the hut to the upward path, she fled down the mountain and back to her mother's cottage. And before many years she took the son of the woodcutter for her husband, and they did live together until they both died.

Now, although she loved her dearly, Dora had always thought that her elder sister had showed too little spirit in her encounter with the old woman of the mountain. And when she in her turn was fourteen years old and just entering the full beauty of maidenhood, she went one day to her mother, and said, "Mother dear, I am fourteen years old and almost ready to be a maiden and

mistress of my own house, and yet I have never been to the top of the mountain which shelters us from the harsh east wind. Please, mother, wrap some bread and cheese in my apron and I will climb the mountain and look over the lands to the east."

But her mother was sad and said, "Daughter dear, I am afraid for you to climb the mountain, for folk say that the old hag who lives up there all alone and crazed with evil and loneliness, kills any who go up the mountain and sucks the marrow from their bones."

And Dora went away, but the next day she asked her mother the same thing and had the same reply, and the next day and the next, until sadly and with a heavy heart did as she asked and wrapped a loaf of bread and a round of cheese in Dora's apron. And she bade farewell to her daughter and placed around her neck a silvern chain from which hung a little silvern rose.

Dora said farewell to her father and her sisters and set off to climb the winding path which led from the door of the cottage to the summit of the mountain.

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When she had walked for a little time and a long time, and had eaten her loaf of bread and her round of cheese was no more than a memory, Dora came to the place where lay the dark, rocky pool, and she stopped to drink. But as she put out her hand towards the water, she heard the harsh voice saying, "What are you doing by my pool, maid?"

There behind her was the aged beldame with the corkscrew nose, looking even dirtier and uglier than she had before. Dora was made of sterner stuff than her sister, but even she was frightened by the sudden appearance of this horrible hag. But she gathered her wits about her and asked the harridan for a little drink of water to quench her thirst.

"Well," said the old woman, "if it's water you want you can drink your fill, but you can pay me for it by cleaning my house."

Dora accepted this bargain as gracefully as she could. She drank her fill and, taking more water in the old woman's bucket, she followed her new mistress to her tiny hut which lay across the path to the summit.

Now, you would not have thought that that hut had been cleaned within the last twenty years, and Dora saw that it would be more than a day and a night that she would spend cleaning it. But she set to her task with determination, and scrubbed and rubbed and polished until her back ached, and her arms and legs were as heavy as marble. She was still no more than half done when she heard a little voice above her head:

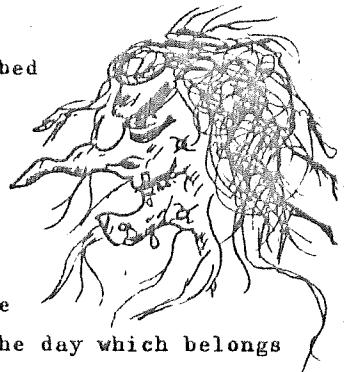
"Little Mistress, Little Mistress," it said, "Of your kindness, please give me a sip of clean water." Dora looked up, and there, hanging from the rafter, was the cage with the small, bedraggled lark. "Please, Little Mistress," she pleaded, "a mouthful of clean water."

Dora looked all about her, but the only water in the hut was that which lay in her bucket, and that was so black that she could have blacked her shoes with it. The only way she could bring clean water to the little bird was by fetching it from the well, and that would mean that she would not finish her work before night fell again. But she remembered how thirsty she had been when she reached the pool, and sighing to herself, she took down a cup from the shelf, filled it at the pond, and brought it back to the caged bird. She held the brimming cup against the bars of the cage, and the little lark dipped her beak gratefully into the cool, clear water.

To Dora's amazement, as the bird drank, her feathers became more glossy, and she seemed to grow larger and handsomer; even her cage was bigger. Dora listened entranced as the lark began to sing of the eastern lands beyond the mountain, but, too soon, they heard the old woman stirring in her sleep beneath the tree. The lark ceased to sing, but whispered in Dora's ear, "You must return to your work, Little Mistress, or the old woman will be angry; but beware, for she will not want you to leave when the work is done."



"Oh, Little Sister, what shall I do?" sobbed Dora, "I want to climb to the top of the mountain, and, even if I escape from the old woman, her hut blocks the path to the summit."



"Listen carefully and do as I say, Little Mistress," said the bird, "On the night of the day which belongs to no year, this hut spins around like a wheel, and it is possible to leap out of the door onto the upward path. But the old woman is sworn to destroy any who try to make that leap, so before you can attempt it, you must wait until she falls asleep, then take the hatchet and chop her head right off."

Dora was horrified and she cried, "Little Sister, that would be a shameful thing, to murder an old woman in her sleep, however foul she be."

But the bird bade her be silent, saying, "Do not say so, Little Mistress, for in truth the old woman was never maid nor mistress, but a serpent in human form. Do you as I advise, and you shall come safe to the top of the mountain; but take care to chop off her head with one blow, for you will never have the chance to strike a second time."

So Dora went back to her work, and by the time the old woman came into the hut it was so clean that it sparkled in the sunlight. Dora put away her scrubbing brush and polishing rag, and poured the dirty water outside the door.

The old woman was surprised to find Dora still in the hut, but she summoned from her cunning mouth the most ingratiating words that she could find: "You must be tired, maid, for you have worked so hard. Lie down, sweetling, on this bed and rest yourself."

Dora did as the woman said, and the ancient crone flung herself down on a pile of rushes and was soon sound asleep.

Now this was the night of the day which belongs to no year, and the old woman was no sooner asleep than the hut began to spin like a wheel; slowly at first, then faster and faster. Dora rose cautiously from her bed and crept to the chimney corner where the hatchet lay. Then she walked on tiptoe to the place where the old woman slept. She raised her arm and brought the hatchet down on the hag's skinny neck. But at the last moment her heart misgave her, and the blow landed on the mound of rushes. The hag awoke with a shriek. Dora, in panic, fled to the door of the hut and, without a thought for the spinning, leapt through. But at that moment, the door opened not onto the upward path, nor even onto the downward one. Below Dora's feet, the ground fell away five thousand feet to the crags which loomed over her mother's cottage; and there the corse of the maid came to rest.

There now remained to the aging parents only the youngest daughter, Flora, and on her they poured out all their love, for she was as gentle as the fawn and as wise as the subtle serpent. But when Flora was fourteen years old, and just entering the full beauty of maidenhood, she went one day to her mother, and said, "Mother dear, I am fourteen years of age and almost ready to be a maiden and mistress of my own house, and yet I have never been to the top of the mountain which shelters us from the harsh east wind. Please, Mother, wrap some bread and cheese in my apron, and I will climb the mountain and look over the lands to the east."

But her mother wept and said: "Daughter dear, I am afraid for you to climb the mountain, for I fear that the old hag who lives up there, all alone and crazed with evil and loneliness, killed your sister and will kill you too, and suck the marrow from your bones."

And Flora went away, but the next day she asked her mother the same thing and had the same reply, and the next day and the next, until her mother, sadly and with a heavy heart, did as she asked and wrapped a loaf of bread and a round of cheese in Flora's apron. And she bade farewell to her daughter and placed around her neck a necklace of crystal beads, each one carved into the shape of a perfect rose. Flora said farewell to her father and set off to

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climb the steep, winding path which led from the door of the cottage to the summit of the mountain.

When she had walked for a little time and a long time, and had eaten her loaf of bread and her round of cheese was no more than a memory, Flora came to the place where lay the dark, rocky pool, and she stopped to drink. But as she put out her hand towards the water, she heard the harsh voice saying "What are you doing by my pool, maid?"

There behind her was the crone with the corkscrew nose, looking fouler even than she had before. But Flora kept her wits about her and replied courteously: "Mistress, I ask your pardon if I am trespassing, but, of your kindness, please let me drink from your pool."

"Well," said the crone, "If it's water you want, drink your fill, but you can pay me for it by cleaning my house." Flora agreed wholeheartedly to this bargain and, after drinking her fill, followed her new mistress to her tiny hut which lay across the path to the summit.

Well, you may not believe it, but that hut looked as if it had not been cleaned since the day it was built, and Flora saw that it would be much more than a day and a night that she would spend cleaning it. But as soon as the old woman had gone to lie under her tree, Flora noticed the cage hanging from the rafter and the little, bedraggled lark which was asleep inside it.

"Oh, Little Sister," she said, "Your water bowl is quite empty. Let me bring you clean water from the pool." So saying, she took down a cup from the shelf, washed it in the clean water in the bucket and ran down to the pool to fill it. Then she hurried back to the hut, without spilling a drop, and held it against the bars of the cage so that the thirsty bird could drink.

To Flora's amazement, as the lark drank, her feathers became more glossy and she seemed to grow larger and handsomer; even her cage was bigger. She

began to sing of the eastern lands beyond the mountain until she heard the old woman stirring in her sleep beneath the tree. The lark ceased to sing but whispered in Flora's ear.

"You must begin your work, Little Mistress, or the old woman will be angry and beat you, but beware, for when you have finished, she will not want you to leave."

"Little Sister, give me your advice," said Flora. "How can I reach the top of the mountain when this hut blocks the way? I would gladly serve the old woman for seven years, if I could only hope to find the path to the summit."

"Listen carefully and do as I say, Little Mistress," said the bird. "It is not by serving the old woman that you will find your way to the top, for she is sworn to prevent any from reaching the summit. But on the night of the day which belongs to no year, this hut spins around like a wheel, and it is possible to leap out of the door onto the upward path. But, before you can do that, you must wait until the old woman falls asleep, then take the hatchet and chop her head right off."

Flora was horrified and she cried, "Little Sister, for shame. I cannot murder an old woman in her sleep, however foul she be!"

But the bird bid her be silent, saying, "Do not say so, Little Mistress, for the crone would destroy you. In truth, she was never maid nor mistress, but a serpent in human form. Do as I advise, and you will come safe to the top of the mountain, but take care to chop off her head with one blow, for you will never have the chance to strike a second time."

So Flora began to clean the hut. And she scrubbed and rubbed and polished, and all the time she pondered on the words of the lark; and she prayed for help to make the right choice. In less time than seemed possible, the hut gleamed like a new pin, and Flora put away her scrubbing brush and pol-

ishing rag, and poured away the dirty water outside the door.

When the old woman came back to the hut, she was surprised to see Flora still there, but she summoned from her cunning mouth the most ingratiating words.

"You must be tired, maid, for you have worked so hard. Lie down, my sweetling, on this bed and rest yourself."

But though her words were honeyed, Flora looked into her eyes and saw that they were the lidless eyes of a snake, and she determined to do exactly as the lark had told her. She lay on the bed and the old woman flung herself upon the pile of rushes and was soon sound asleep.

Now this was the night of the day which belongs to no year, and the old woman was no sooner asleep than the hut began to spin like a wheel, slowly at first, then faster and faster. Flora rose cautiously from her bed and crept to the chimney corner where the hatchet lay. Then she walked on tip-toe to the place where the old woman slept. She raised her arm and brought the hatchet down on the hag's skinny neck. And her stroke was straight and true, and the crone's ugly head was riven from her malformed body. As the blow fell, the cage door sprung open and the lark flew free with a glorious song of praise to the Mother of All Things. And as she sang, her form changed to that of a beautiful maiden shining like the sun and dressed in a robe of dazzling white. Flora was filled with wonder.

"Who are you, maiden?" she asked.

"I am one who lay in thrall to the snake but whom your courage has freed," replied the maid. "Go now towards the summit, for the path is at your feet. I will come with you."

Flora realised that the hut was no longer spinning, but the door opened upon the upward path. The two maids climbed it with light hearts and

light feet, until they reached the summit. There, below them, the fair, shining lands of the east were spread. Despite the distance, they could see the folk working in the fields and the fair houses and noble temples of the towns as clearly as if they stood among them, and Flora heard the singing of the temple maidens rising to greet the dawn.

At last, the lark-maiden said: "Go now, sister. Return to your own folk. But remember what you have seen and heard, and some day you will return to walk in that fair land."

So Flora took her leave of her sister, and returned to her mother's cottage, to the great joy of her parents. And in later years she became a great teacher and was beloved of all her pupils, who saw through her the beauty of the eastern lands, until at last she returned, as the lark-maiden had promised, to walk in that fair country, to her heart's content.

